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Policy issues

Follow-up to and implementation of the outcomes of United Nations summits, in particular the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, and major intergovernmental meetings of relevance to the United Nations Environment Assembly

Implementation of Governing Council decision 27/2

Enhancing the coordinating role of the United Nations Environment Programme in the United Nations system on environmental matters: process to prepare a United Nations system-wide strategy on the environment

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

The present report is prepared pursuant to the mandate of the United Nations Environment Programme as the body coordinating the United Nations system on environmental matters, and suggests possible ways of enhancing that role in follow-up to paragraph 88 of the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, "The future we want". It sets out a proposed process, to be initiated by the Executive Director, for the preparation of a United Nations system-wide strategy on the environment.

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I. Introduction

1. As an integral dimension of sustainable development, the environment is inseparable from economic and social development: environmental sustainability is locked together with economic and social development as the foundation underpinning those processes. Furthermore, environmental issues, in particular those of global concern to the international community, are inherently multidimensional and the various subsets of environmental, economic and social issues and interests are interconnected.

2. At the same time, however, individual institutions, including most of the bodies, funds, programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations system, are each established with specific mandates and limited jurisdiction. Because of the autonomy exercised by their governing structures in their decision-making processes, the policies and actions on environmental and environment-related matters falling within their respective mandates have often been handled in a manner independent from the decision-making processes and activities of other organizations dealing with the same or similar matters.

3. Against this background, there have been repeated calls to organizations to strengthen coordination of their environmental and related policies and activities. While considerable progress has been achieved in this endeavour, further efforts are needed for more effective coordination in the handling of environmental and environment-related matters, including in the context of the environmental programmes of bodies, funds, programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations system.

II. Role and objectives of the United Nations Environment Programme

4. One of the main responsibilities of the United Nationsl Environment Programme (UNEP) as the leading global environmental authority is to promote the coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the United Nations system. Together with its responsibility to set the global environmental agenda and to serve as an authoritative advocate for the global environment, the effective engagement of UNEP in coordinating the efforts of bodies, funds, programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations system in the field of the environment is key to the full performance of its functions, as also emphasized in paragraph 88 of the outcome document of the United Nations Conference of Sustainable Development.[1]

5. This role is reflected in the mandate and responsibilities of the United Nations Environment Assembly of UNEP and those of the Executive Director of UNEP, as stipulated in General Assembly resolution 2997 (XXVII) of 15 December 1972. The main functions and responsibilities of the Environment Assembly, as entrusted in that resolution to the then Governing Council of UNEP, include the following:

(a) To promote international cooperation in the field of the environment and to recommend, as appropriate, policies to this end;

(b) To provide general policy guidance for the direction and coordination of environmental programmes within the United Nations system;

(c) To receive and review the periodic reports of the Executive Director of UNEP on the implementation of environmental programmes within the United Nations system;

(d) To keep under review the world environmental situation in order to ensure that emerging environmental problems of wide international significance receive appropriate and adequate consideration by Governments;

(e) To promote the contribution of the relevant international scientific and other professional communities to the acquisition, assessment and exchange of environmental knowledge and information and, as appropriate, to the technical aspects of the formulation and implementation of environmental programmes within the United Nations system.

[1] See the Nairobi Declaration on the Role and Mandate of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), General Assembly resolution S-19/2 on the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21, and paragraph 88 of the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, "The future we want" (General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex).

6. In support of the above functions and responsibilities, the General Assembly, by the same resolution, stipulated the responsibilities of the Executive Director of UNEP. Following the establishment of the United Nations Environment Assembly, those responsibilities include to coordinate, under the guidance of the Environment Assembly, environmental programmes within the United Nations system, to keep their implementation under review and to assess their effectiveness; to advise, as appropriate and under the guidance of the Environment Assembly, intergovernmental bodies of the United Nations system on the formulation and implementation of environmental programmes; to provide, at the request of all parties concerned, advisory services for the promotion of international cooperation in the field of the environment; and to submit to the Environment Assembly, on the Executive Director's own initiative or upon request, proposals embodying medium-range and long-range planning for United Nations programmes in the field of the environment.

7. With regard to the coordinating role of UNEP in the United Nations system, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, in paragraph 88 of its outcome document, emphasizes that the role of UNEP as the leading global environmental authority should be strengthened, among other things, by enhancing the voice of UNEP and its ability to fulfil its coordination mandate within the United Nations system by strengthening its engagement in key United Nations coordination bodies and empowering UNEP to lead efforts to formulate United Nations system-wide strategies on the environment.[2]

8. By its decision 27/2, adopted at its twenty-seventh session, held for the first time with universal membership, the Governing Council decided, among other things, to consider additional measures to strengthen the voice and ability of UNEP to fulfil its coordination mandate on environmental matters and, in that regard, invited the Secretary-General to take necessary steps to enhance the role of UNEP in key United Nations coordination bodies.

9. The coordinating role played by UNEP in the United Nations system in the field of the environment should be strengthened in particular in a manner consistent with its mandate, as set out above. In order to ensure effective coordination for greater coherence in policies and the planning and implementation of activities in environmental and environment-related activities across the United Nations system, the Executive Director should initiate, in collaboration with all relevant bodies, funds, programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations system, a process to prepare a proposal for a United Nations system-wide strategy on the environment, which may serve as guidance for medium-range and long-range planning for environmental programmes within the United Nations system.

10. Taking into account the repeated calls on the international community to close the gap between commitments and implementation, a particular focus for such a strategy might be placed on assisting Member States of the United Nations, of specialized agencies and of other relevant organizations in achieving the internationally agreed environmental objectives and goals. The following clusters of subjects, as identified in a compilation of the existing internationally agreed environmental objectives and goals prepared in consultation with Governments and submitted to the UNEP Governing Council at its previous sessions,[3] provides an indication of possible thematic areas which might be addressed collectively or individually by bodies, funds, programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations system:

(a) Air pollution and air quality;

(b) Biodiversity;

(c) Chemicals and waste;

(d) Climate change;

(e) Energy;

(f) Forests;

(g) Freshwater;

[2] Paragraph 88 of the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development stipulates also other means by which UNEP should be strengthened, including by promoting a strong science-policy interface, building on existing international instruments, assessments, panels and information networks; disseminating and sharing evidence-based environmental information, and raising public awareness on critical, as well as emerging, environmental issues; and providing capacity-building to countries, as well as supporting and facilitating access to technology.

[3] Most recently issued as a conference room paper at the twelfth special session of the Governing Council, in February 2012, which updated earlier versions submitted to the Council.

(h) Oceans and seas;

(i) Soil, land use, land degradation and desertification;

(j) Environmental governance.

11. It may be noted that, in each of the above clusters of thematic areas, a number of bodies, funds, programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations system are active in performing certain functions in accordance with their respective mandates, and also that, within each of those functions, a number of entities might be undertaking activities related to several thematic areas. Such cross-cutting functions might include, for instance, environmental data, information and assessments, developing and supporting the implementation of norms, standards, procedures and international legal instruments, and capacity-building.

12. Accordingly, ways and means of achieving policy coherence among various bodies, funds, programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations system in the field of the environment might be evaluated against a matrix of the above thematic areas and cross-cutting functions, on the basis of which the structure and contents of a possible United Nations system-wide strategy on the environment might be considered.

13. It should be noted that any efforts to ensure the enhanced coordination of environmental programmes of the United Nations system should benefit Member States of the United Nations, of specialized agencies and of other relevant organizations in their own efforts to achieve environmental sustainability. This would in turn require their active engagement in ensuring that policies across those organizations are made coherent through coordinated decision-making in the respective intergovernmental parliamentary organs and governing bodies. A United Nations system-wide strategy on the environment would be effective only if supported by decisions of those intergovernmental organs and bodies.

III. Suggested action

14. Given the above background, the Environment Assembly may wish to recommend to the General Assembly that it invite all relevant bodies, funds, programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations system to contribute to the above-mentioned process to be initiated by the Executive Director.

15. At the inter-agency level, such contribution to the proposed process might be facilitated through appropriate inter-agency coordination mechanisms of the United Nations system. The Environment Management Group, which serves the entire United Nations system as a voluntary inter-agency coordination arrangement and is institutionally distinct from UNEP, may be employed to facilitate dialogue among the secretariats of the relevant bodies, funds, programmes and specialized agencies, on the basis of the work initiated by the Executive Director. In addition, the Secretary-General might be invited to facilitate efforts to secure contributions from the executive heads of relevant bodies, funds, programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations system to the process, in particular in the context of coordination mechanisms under the Chief Executives Board for Coordination.

16. It should be noted, however, that since the secretariats of those bodies, funds, programmes and specialized agencies are each guided by the mandates and the policy frameworks established by their respective member States and governing bodies, their efforts to bring coherence into policies in the field of the environment will eventually have to be decided or endorsed by those governing bodies. Such institutional backing from coherent intergovernmental decisions would be key to making any United Nations system-wide strategy on the environment effective and sustainable.

17. Bearing in mind the above background, the Executive Director, after conducting the necessary consultative processes across the United Nations system, should submit to the Environment Assembly at a future session no later than 2016 the outcome of the above process in the form of a proposed United Nations system-wide strategy on the environment.